

IMPLEMENTING RAFT STRATEGY TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' SKILL IN WRITING FORMAL LETTER

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Abstract: This research aims to find out how the implementation of RAFT (Role, Audience, Format and Topic) strategy enhanced the students' skill in writing a formal letter and to investigate how RAFT strategy improved the students' writings in Grade 10 "SMA Tunas Bangsa Kubu Raya". This research is a classroom action research. The subject of this research numbered 15 students. Having conducted three cycles of action research, the researcher found out that the teaching practice improved and the result of students' writing scores also improved from cycle to cycle in terms of content and language. The students were able to write more effectively as they were aware who they were writing as, to whom they were writing, what format their writing was and the topic of their writing. The students wrote more purposively and focused after being introduced to RAFT writing strategy.

Keywords: *RAFT, writing skill, formal letter*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui implementasi strategi RAFT (Role, Audience, Format and Topic) dalam meningkatkan keterampilan menulis surat resmi dan untuk menelusuri bagaimana strategi tersebut berdampak pada tulisan siswa di kelas 10 SMA Tunas Bangsa Kubu Raya. Penelitian ini dilaksanakan dalam bentuk penelitian tindakan kelas dengan 15 siswa sebagai subjek penelitian. Dalam 3 siklus yang telah dilaksanakan, ditemukan bahwa kegiatan mengajar meningkat dan nilai tulisan siswa meningkat dari satu siklus ke siklus lainnya, khususnya dalam aspek isi dan bahasa. Siswa menulis dengan lebih efektif karena mereka lebih memperhatikan peran mereka sebagai penulis, kepada siapa mereka menulis, format serta topik tulisan mereka. Siswa juga lebih memperhatikan tujuan tulisan mereka setelah strategi menulis RAFT dikenalkan pada mereka.

Kata kunci: *RAFT, kemampuan menulis, surat resmi*

Writing is a skill that needs improvement from time to time. It enables people to express thoughts, and to communicate ideas and views to others. In education, writing is a vital aspect. College students typically will be obliged to write a variety of essays throughout their collegiate career. Not only is writing an

important academic skill, but it is also an important skill that translates into any career field as well. Nearly all professions require some forms of writing on the job. For example, doctors and nurses write medical reports on patients; accountants and business managers create financial reports; engineers and software technicians write instruction sheets and user manuals; nearly every worker in all business fields composes emails and other forms of written communication for customers, clients, and co-workers. Ultimately, the number of job tasks that require writing is countless.

Since writing is used in almost all fields and jobs, it is a skill that all students and workers need to learn and to become better at. Regardless of the actual assignment and the format used, understanding what makes for good writing and the proper techniques to use can lead to creating a well-crafted essay in a shorter amount of time. According to Barry, Campbell & Daish (2006, p.11), a good writing is clear, straightforward and easy to understand, and it has confident beginnings and endings. Furthermore, the writers show involvement with the topic they are writing about, and is able to arouse a reader's interest in it.

Writing requires the students to consider audience and purpose. An effective writing enables students to write fluently and purposefully for an audience. Lucantoni (2002, p.53) claims that a good writer "involves a consideration of the purpose of the activity, and the audience, which in turn will indicate the writer whether a formal or informal register is required." Moreover, Barry, Campbell & Daish (2006, p.12) urge that an effective writer considers the tone, register and sense of audience which are suitable for the purpose. For example, "a letter to friend should sound friendly and sympathetic, whereas a letter to a newspaper should sound more formal and distanced." (Barry, Campbell & Daish, 2006, p. 12)

Having observed the compositions written by the students of Grade 10 of a senior high school in which is named SMA Tunas Bangsa, the researcher found out that the students had difficulty in writing, especially writing a formal letter. In IGCSE English as a Second Language syllabus, writing a formal letter is one of seven exercises in Reading and Writing Examination. The students are required to write about 150-200 words of continuous prose with specified purpose, format and audience. The students must use an appropriate register. A stimulus was provided in the form of pictures or photos and/or short prompts. It was found out that some writings are difficult to follow and re-reading was needed in order to make out the sense. The writings do not make a reader feel drawn into the topic and they are not entirely clear about the meaning. For some writings, the meaning is clear but they do not make the reader find them especially interesting or enjoyable to read. Furthermore, the students do not focus on the prompts given and fail to use appropriate register in accordance with the format of the letter.

To solve the aforementioned problems, the writer has done some research on writing strategy that can be implemented in the classroom. RAFT strategy is considered as an effective writing skill to solve the existing problem. RAFT is an acronym for Role, Audience, Format and Topic; the key elements are located in every good writing assignment (Buehl, 2014, p. 173). The RAFT strategy boosts students to understand their role as a writer, their audience, their varied formats, and their expected content. This writing strategy "promotes the students to raise

their ability in thinking critically and reflecting while they synthesize what they have learned” (Sejnost & Thiese, 2010, p. 85). In addition, RAFT strategy also bolsters the students’ sense of what it means to be a writer by making them aware of the impact that the topic and the format can have on their audience. Therefore, specificity and focus of the writing in the strategy can make the students enjoy writing (Sejnost & Thiese, 2007, p.78).

Similar previous research implementing RAFT strategy to improve writing skill conducted by Sudarningsih & Wardana (2011, p.12) showed that RAFT strategy could improve recount writing skill of the tenth grade students. Furthermore, the students also exhibited positive attitudes, high learning motivation as well as active participation in learning recount text writing skill through RAFT technique. Another similar research on RAFT strategy was conducted in experimental research by Parilasanti, Suarnajaya, & Marjohan (2014). The finding of this research showed that there was a significant difference in students’ writing competency between the students taught by RAFT strategy and conventional strategy. The former students showed the confident writing compared to the latter students.

Observing the advantages that RAFT strategy offers to improve the writing skill, the researcher conducted a classroom action research in Grade 10 of SMA Tunas Bangsa by implementing RAFT strategy in order to improve the students’ skill in writing formal letter. It is expected that by implementing RAFT strategy in teaching writing the students are able to write more effectively using appropriate registers according to the format of the letter. Moreover, the students were expected to write more purposefully for a specific audience. The findings of this result would add more rings to the chain of teaching writing and provide a solution for the other teachers to deal the similar problem in their classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Design of Research

This research is a classroom action research. It investigated the improvement of the students’ skill in writing a formal letter by implementing RAFT strategy. The research “involves a self-reflective, critical and systematic research to exploring the teacher’s own teaching contexts” (Burns, 2010, p. 2). According to Somekh (2006, p. 14), the teachers benefit from conducting a classroom action research as they learn from their own practice, then in the end the teachers become more aware of what is going on in their classroom.

Subject of Research

The research participants were Grade 10 students of SMA Tunas Bangsa Kubu Raya. There were 15 students in this class and they are prepared for IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) writing exam. In the examination, the students are required to write a 150-200 word formal letter depending on the given prompts.

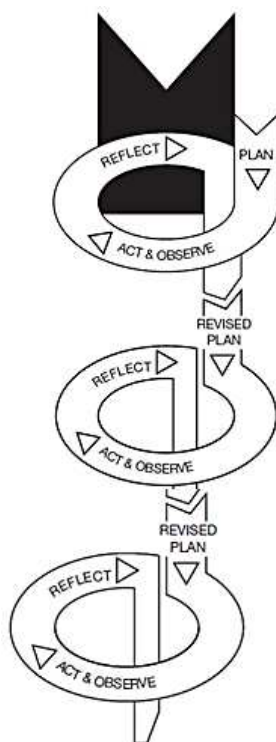
Technique of Data Collection

Tools such as field notes and observational checklist are used in the observational approaches (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 180). In this research, both

researcher and collaborator taught English at the same school. While the researcher taught the lesson, the collaborator observed any important data during the teaching learning process using the observational checklist table provided by the researcher.

The collected information during the classroom interaction was discussed by the researcher and the collaborator to reflect on the teaching learning process. This engaged some changes in the next plan, changing the way the teacher teaches, or changing the assessment being employed, or the modifying RAFT strategy. Based on this reflection, the researcher and collaborator planned the next cycle. The present research covered three cycles as shown in Figure 1 modified from Koshy (2005, p.4).

Figure 1 Cycle of action research



Teaching Procedure

The teacher reviewed the previous lessons on writing formal letters. The students recalled the language elements in each format of formal letters like newspaper/magazine articles, application letters and complaint letters. The teacher first introduced the elements of RAFT strategy. The teacher explained to the students what they needed to consider various writing aspects including role, audience, format and topic before writing assignments. The teacher then told the students to structure their writing based on their roles in writing, the audience of their writing, the format of their writing and the topic of the writing.

The teacher displayed the key elements of RAFT and discussed the key elements in the class. The teacher then asked the students to brainstorm topics and write down the suggestions listing roles, audiences and formats associated with

each topic. The teacher then limited the format of the writing that students were going to write – formal letters. The teacher then divided the students to group of three and had them brainstorm and make another RAFT list focusing on formal letters that they have learned. The teacher moved around the students to give assistance as needed. Then, the groups shared their complete assignments with the class. The teacher distributed a text entitled “Little Things Mean a Lot” to each student. The teacher then made the students to be aware of RAFT for their writing:

1. **Role:** After reading about “ethics”, the students were asked to take on a particular role in the professional world, like a secretary, who would use the information. The teacher encouraged the students to select a job in their chosen career field.
2. **Audience:** The teacher had the students brainstorm why “ethics” is important and how it could be applied and promoted in their career field. For example, for a student interested in an auto technician career, “ethics” would be important when giving customers estimates of the work needed on the customer’s car. In early childhood education careers, “ethics” would include teaching students the importance of fair play or the acceptance of cultural differences in others. In the medical field, the ethical treatment of patients is paramount.
3. **Format:** The teacher had the students select a method to disseminate the information that is appropriate for the role they are assuming. They should select the medium (letter, brochure, report, press release, presentation, etc.) most suitable for their career field. The teacher asked the students to develop and design a format and then present the information to their selected audience.
4. **Topic:** The topic was “ethics.” Students would use the information they learned in the unit. In addition, they would need to take the topic one step further by researching how ethics may apply in their career field. The teacher asked the students to work alone or in groups to complete their projects. The students with the same career interest could work in the same group. Students should apply the information they learned from their reading to their new audience and purpose.

Tool of Data Collection

The present research data were collected by an observational checklist, field note and the students’ writings. The field notes and observational checklist were used to keep a record on what was happening during the teaching and learning process.

The research data were collected by the use of the observational table. With the observation and reflection after the action in Cycle 1, a new observational checklist was then produced for Cycle 2. Based on this observational checklist, Cycle 3 was planned. The observational checklist table was provided with the columns of teaching procedure, notes for teachers, checklist (yes and no), students’ response and notes for students. This observational checklist helped the collaborator to monitor whether or not the planned procedure was implemented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis, the researcher found out that the students' writings improved from one cycle to another cycle. The following table shows the students' scores from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3.

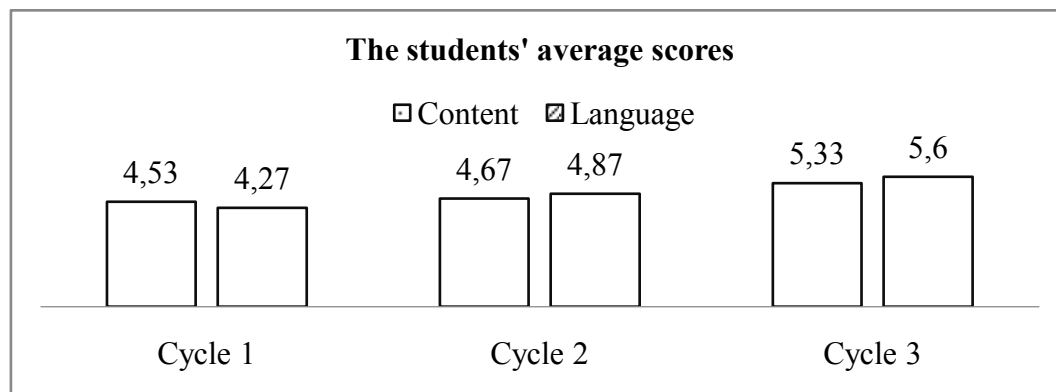
Table 1 The students' scores from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3

Cycle	Content	Average	Language	Average
1	1 student scored 3 7 students scored 4 5 students scored 5 2 students scored 6	4.53	2 students scored 3 7 students scored 4 5 students scored 5 2 students scored 6	4.27
2	6 students scored 4 8 students scored 5 1 student scored 6	4.67	6 students scored 4 8 students scored 5 1 student scored 6	4.87
3	10 students scored 5 5 students scored 6	5.33	7 students scored 5 7 students scored 6 1 student scored 7	5.60

In Cycle 3, there was no student scored 4 for content and language. Most students scored 5 in content which was considered satisfactory. It means that students fulfilled the task with reasonable attempt at appropriate register, and some sense of purpose and audience. A satisfactory attempt has been made to address the topic, but there might be digressions. In content aspect, the students scored 5 which was considered safe that means the students used simple structures and vocabulary. The meaning is clear, and the work is of a safe literate standard.

Some students scored 6-7 for content. It means that their writings were considered effective. It has fulfilled the task, with appropriate register and good sense of purpose and audience. For language aspect, some students also scored 6-7. Their sentence showed varieties of structure and length. They used formal expressions and were precise in use of vocabulary. The following chart shows that the students' writing improved from Cycle 1 of which the average score for content was 4.53 and 4.27 for language to Cycle 3 which scored 5.33 and 5.60 for content and language respectively.

Figure 2 The students' average scores from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3



In Cycle 1, the teacher did not clearly explain and emphasize the importance of RAFT in writing. As the result, some informal expressions were encountered in the students' writings. The following writing sample was taken from Cycle 1. This letter was a response to a complaint about the safe diet cola. Although Student 2 has fulfilled the RAFT elements, spoken expression was still found (the underlined phrase) in this letter.

- (1) Worry no more, because our cola is the safest diet cola among all. It has been confirmed by several scientists group saying it is safe. Our diet cola has the right amount of diet needed daily. But drinking it too much might harm some of the organs. Too much is never good, though. But it will not be a bad thing to be consumed because it has the daily needs, less calories and even it is sweet, it will not lead to any diseases. Using the state of art technologies, it is also clean during the process of making it. 99,9% safe! So, worry no more.

The spoken expression in (1) *worry no more* is not appropriate to be written in a formal letter. The student could write *there is no need to worry anymore* instead. Another writing sample shows informal expression as well. In (2) Student 4 put the imperative in the letter which was not formal enough. The expression *don't hesitate* is not appropriate in a formal letter. The student should not write the contraction such as *don't hesitate*, but the student should write *please have no doubt*, instead.

- (2) Don't hesitate to buy our products because we guarantee that our product is safe to be consumed. It tastes sweet but low ...

The above two examples indicate that students were not aware that they were writing to the people who have written a complaint. Their language must be formal in response to such a customer. This happened because in Cycle 1 the teacher skipped some important parts in her teaching practice. The teacher did not emphasize the importance of RAFT strategy. In that meeting the teacher only introduced the RAFT strategy to the students. The students just knew briefly and they were still unfamiliar with the strategy in this cycle.

In Cycle 2, with the revised lesson plan, the teacher emphasized the importance of RAFT strategy and gave clearer example of RAFT. The students reviewed some important expressions used in a formal letter. The improvement of the teaching practice brought the improvement in the students' writing. The result of the test in Cycle 2 showed that the average students' score was 4.67 for content and 4.87 for language. The improvement in Cycle 2 was because the students got more familiar with RAFT strategy.

Although the students' scores did not improve very significantly, the teacher has shown improvement in the teaching practice which led to the improvement of students' writings in term of the structure and the language. For example, Student 2 has been able to open the letter formally; (3) is the writing sample of Student 2 in Cycle 2 when the students were asked to write a letter to the local newspaper giving views about the plan to knock down the local museum. Sample (3) shows

that the expression *Through this letter, I would like ... is* appropriate for a formal letter.

- (3) Through this letter, I would like to give some views about the knock down of the local museum issue. Some people think that ...

Student 4 also has shown improvement in the writing. In this second cycle the student began the letter formally and structured the letter better than the letter in Cycle 1. The expression *I would like to give my opinion* in Sample (4) is a formal expression.

- (4) I would like to give my opinion about your idea to knock down the local museum ...

In Cycle 2, the teacher gave the students an opportunity to have a practice with various writing prompts. This led to the improvement that the students showed in Cycle 2. This finding is supported by Lucantoni (2002, p.15) claiming that in order to be prepared effectively for examination questions, the students need to have practice with more prompts.

Although some students improved their writing, the teaching practice must be improved in the next cycle because the teacher only explained briefly the importance of considering each element of RAFT before they begin their writing. The teacher also forgot to ask the students to sum up the importance of using RAFT. She just skipped to limit the writing format.

In Cycle 3, the results of the students' writing showed more improvement. The average score of the students was 5.33 for content and 5.60 for language. The improvement of the language was significant. There were 7 students scored 5, 7 students scored 6 and 1 student scored 7. It means that more students improved the use of their language. Their writing was much more formal compared to the previous cycles.

In this cycle, the students were asked to write a letter to a local newspaper suggesting that folic acid (a vitamin important for health, which was found naturally in some green vegetables) should be added artificially to bread. Student 2 used appropriate expressions in giving opinions. In sample (5) below, the student used an appropriate phrase in giving opinions: *in my opinion*, and requesting: *I would be grateful*.

- (5) I am writing this letter to express my annoyance with the news concerning the folic acid which should be artificially added to bread. In my opinion, adding the folic acid to bread may not always healthy, even when folic acid comes from plant. ... I would be grateful if experts could consider about adding folic acid artificially to the bread.
...

The improvement was shown by Student 4. He used a formal expression in the letter: *I am writing this letter* and wrote the letter more purposefully. The student wrote *I, as the local resident have asked*, this shows that the student was

aware that his role in this letter was a local resident. It was obvious that RAFT strategy has helped the student in response to the given prompts.

- (6) I am writing this letter regarding the news about folic acid. I do agree with ... I, as the local resident have asked ...

In Cycle 3, the students were given a task to do a pair check on RAFT elements of their friends' letters. With this kind of task, the students had a chance to practice communicative task in the classroom. The students were enthusiastic in checking their friends' work. Lucantoni (2002, p. 15) claims that it is essential for a teacher to provide the students opportunities for pairwork and groupwork. This groupwork enabled the students to learn from their friends' mistakes.

Taking RAFT elements into account in writing made the students more aware that a good writer should be personally involved in the writing. Sejnost & Thiese (2007, p. 78) urge that the more the students are aware of their role in writing, the more effective their writing will be. In Cycle 1, the teacher only explained about the importance of RAFT strategy briefly, without a clear example. Yet in Cycle 2, the teacher did review the elements of RAFT but she did not give a clear example. As the result the improvement in Cycle 2 was not significant. In Cycle 3, the students were more focused and their writing improved more because the teacher gave a clear example on taking wrong role will affect the paper.

The students began to know the RAFT strategy from zero. They had not known this popular strategy before. The teacher kept familiarizing the students to RAFT strategy. She made them aware to as what they are writing, to whom they are writing, in what format their letter is and what the topic of their letter talks about. The students' attention was put to RAFT elements. The teacher believes that those who notice most will learn most as claimed by Schmidt & Frota in Ying & Hendricks (2004, p. 5).

Another aspect that may support the improvement in Cycle 2 is the group work is more active and the teacher engaged the passive students to be involved actively in the group work. More students participated in the group discussion in Cycle 2. It made the students have better understanding about RAFT elements, which in the end made them more aware of RAFT elements in their writing. From this finding, more active group work led to the improvement in Cycle 2. According to Vygotsky cited in Jacobs, Lee, & Ng (1997, p.12) all learning is social. What the students can do in their group can be done on their own in the other time.

In conclusion, this research started from the teaching practice in Cycle 1 and finished in Cycle 3. The improvement of the teaching practice from one cycle to another cycle boosted the students' writing. They first did not know what RAFT strategy was. Gradually, the students got familiar with the strategy and they were more aware of RAFT elements when they read the prompts. As the result, the students' writing improved a bit from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. In Cycle 3, the improvement was far better.

CONCLUSION

Having analysed the research data, the researcher concludes that RAFT strategy made the students' performance in writing a formal letter improve from cycle to cycle. It strengthens their sense of being a writer by making them aware of the impact of the topic and the format on their audience. In this research, RAFT strategy helped the students to improve their skill in writing a formal letter in terms of content and language. The students were able to write effectively as they were aware of their role, their audience, their writing format and their writing topic. The students wrote more purposively and focused after being introduced to the RAFT writing strategy. Furthermore, RAFT strategy in this research also helped the students to write more appropriate expressions used in a formal letter and to respond the given writing prompts accurately.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the result of the research, there are some suggestions that can be taken into account in the future. The first is that in implementing RAFT strategy in the classroom, the teachers should make sure that in the beginning of the lesson they emphasize the importance of RAFT strategy and give a clear example of RAFT list. Furthermore, they should emphasize that taking a wrong role in writing may affect the writing as different role leads to different point of view. In other words, the teacher should familiarize the students with RAFT strategy.

In addition, the teachers could assign all students the same role, audience, format and topic for their writing until the students become familiar with using the RAFT strategy. Then, as the students become familiar with the process, they should be allowed to brainstorm their own role, audience, format and topic. Moreover, the teachers should give more different writing prompts so the students will be able to analyse different prompts and be able to respond different prompts effectively.

The teachers could implement pair checking in writing using RAFT strategy because it boosts the students' interest in writing. In pair checking, the students learn through their friends' strengths and weaknesses found in the letter. Based on the result of this research, it is recommended that English teachers use RAFT strategy in teaching writing. By implementing RAFT strategy, the students become personally involved in their topic. They begin to look at an issue from a different point of view. More importantly, they write for a specific audience rather than for the teacher which in the end makes their writing more authentic.

There are few researches investigating RAFT strategy, therefore more researchers are expected to do further investigation in the field related to this research. The future researches could design materials based on this strategy and develop this strategy for other skill like speaking.

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